

Chapter One

The sound of the back door banging against the side of the house pounds in my ears. Maybe I am only hearing my heart beating in my chest as I pick up my pace. I trudge up the driveway with my sleeping bag hanging over my shoulder. I kick snow away from the step.

“Mom!” I yell. “I’m home.”

The house is quiet. I dump my backpack on the floor and flick my boots off. The cold air has made a home in the kitchen. I can see my breath. Dishes are piled in the sink, and breakfast stuff is still all over the counter. When I walk down the hall, I glance into the living room. It looks like time has stopped. Mom doesn't go in there much anymore. It used to be her favorite place.

At the bottom of the stairs, I stop to listen. I'm relieved when I hear Duncan talking to himself in his room. It sounds like he is acting out all the characters in a movie. When I reach the landing, I notice Mom's bedroom door is closed.

I take a deep breath and knock. "Mom?"

I can hear her stirring, so I open the door. She is lying in bed with heaps of blankets piled all over her. "Oh, Max. You're home. I didn't hear you come in." She tries to sit up, but she only gets as far as propping herself onto her elbows before she flops back down. She pulls the blankets up to her neck.

"It's freezing in here. Can you check the heat?" She yawns and then says, "What time is it?"

"I don't know. Probably close to four. The bus was a little late."

"Did you say *four*? That can't be right! I only laid down for a few minutes. Oh, I can't believe it!" She looks like she's about to cry. "I have to work tonight, and I feel like a truck hit me."

"I'll go check the heat," I say. I don't bother telling her that the back door was wide open or that I had a great time at the school winter-survival trip at Big Cove Camp. I don't tell her about making banana boats around the campfire, like we used to do with Dad, or how we stayed up late telling ghost stories. No one wanted to go home—especially me.

The next morning I'm in a rush. I'm still not used to having to do everything by myself.

“Duncan!” I yell up the stairs. “Turn off the TV. We’re going to be late!” I wait at the the bottom of the stairs for a few more minutes. Duncan is deep into one of his movies. I shake my head and walk back toward the kitchen. The sun floods in through the window, making it really warm.

Duncan eventually shuffles into the kitchen with his Spider-Man T-shirt on backward and his hair sticking up. “I’m not Duncan. I’m Spider-Man!”

“No one will know you’re Spider-Man with your shirt on *that way*,” I say.

Duncan stands perfectly still while I stand on my tiptoes to turn his shirt around. “Where is Mom?” he asks.

I glance at the clock. “She’s at work,” I say.

“I don’t like her work,” he says.

“Neither do I. Come on, we’ve got to hurry.” I pour cereal into his bowl. Usually I let him do it, but we’re already late. I don’t have time for him to pour it, spill it and then pick up each piece of cereal.

“Do you wanna race?” I ask.

“I’m not racing,” he grumbles.

I inhale my cereal and then start running around grabbing our stuff. When I open the back door, the cold air hits me smack in the face. “Man, that’s freezing. You’re going to need a hat today, Duncan.”

“I don’t want one,” he mumbles.

“I hear ya. But remember your ears hurt when it’s really cold. Besides, Spider-Man wouldn’t be caught dead going out without his hat.”

Duncan shovels another mouthful of his cereal into his mouth. I can tell he is thinking about what I said. “I want my hat,” he says.

“I figured you would.” I throw it to him. He lifts his hand at the right moment and catches it, even though he’s not looking at me. Duncan avoids eye contact at any cost. He places his hat on his head and takes two more bites of cereal. Then he pushes his bowl away and says, “I’m done.”

Outside, the cold air stings my nose. I pull the collar of my coat up as far as it will go.

Our next-door neighbor, Mr. Cooper, is bent down picking up his newspaper. He's usually the only person we see on our street in the morning. He never has his winter coat on, and he wears pants that are way too big for him. Sometimes I wonder if he used to be really big and then lost a bunch of weight but forgot to buy proper clothes afterward. He's nice to Duncan and me. "Hi, Max. Hi, Duncan. It's a little nippy today, eh?"

"I'm Spider-Man," Duncan says.

I smile at Mr. Cooper. He is used to Duncan.

"Sorry, Spider-Man," Mr. Cooper says. "One of these days I'll get it right."

"You're going to confuse him," I say to Duncan once we're out of earshot. "Yesterday you were Batman, and the day before you were Darth Vader!"

"I saw the crack in his bum," Duncan says.

"Well, at least you didn't say that to him." I glance back, but Mr. Cooper is already inside his house.

At the end of the road, we slip into the woods and walk along the path. The snow is deep, but someone has made a trail we can follow. The sun pokes through the tall trees. When we reach the pond, I walk over to the edge and step onto the ice. I get swallowed up in a memory.

There was a full moon, and Dad and I had sneaked out to skate on the pond. We played some hockey, and then I challenged him to a race. I stare at the ice, remembering Dad. In my mind I hear the scrape of the skates as we darted across the pond and the sound of his belly laugh when we reached the other side. Our race ended in a tie. I know he could have beat me, but that was Dad.

The school bell rings in the distance, pulling me back into the present. Duncan and I turn away from the pond and everything that used to matter.

When we get to Duncan's classroom, I open the door as Lilly slips out. She has the attendance book in her hands. "Oh, you made it just in time." She turns around. "Miss d'Entremont, Duncan is here."

"I'm Spider-Man," he reminds her.

"Oh, sorry, Spider-Man. Hi, Max." Lilly smiles at me with a mouthful of hot pink braces.

"Hey—can't talk," I say. "I'm late again."

Lilly's smile fades, or maybe I'm imagining things. I hurry to class. I can't get another late slip. That would mean a call home.

I run the rest of the way, duck into my classroom and slump down in my chair. Ian is laughing with some kids in the back of the class. No one seems to have a care in the world.

Chapter Two

I can hear them. It's like I'm right there.

I probably know who just scored. The sound of laughter echoes through the woods. When Duncan and I round the bend in the path, Ian is sliding belly-up on the ice. He skids smack into the goalie, puck and all.

"And he scores!" Ian yells.

"Nice one!" I shout in his direction.

“Oweee, nice one,” Duncan mimics in a low voice.

Ian stands up and brushes the snow off his pants. “Hey! Can you play today?” he hollers.

“No,” I yell back. “Mom’s got a long shift.” This is my standard answer now. Even when she isn’t at work, I still have to say that.

It kills me. I want to skate with Ian and the guys like I used to.

Ian skates over to the side of the pond. “That sucks!”

“Tell me about it,” I say.

Duncan starts walking in circles with his fist in his mouth. I roll my eyes at Ian and then say to Duncan, “We’re going in a second! Do you really have to *do* that?”

Duncan ignores me.

“Can’t you work something out?” Ian whispers. “He could hang out here while we skate.”

“I wish,” I say. “Look at him.”

Duncan is now crouched down, eating snow.

“Well, you gotta play next Friday, Max,” says Ian. “We’ve got a game with the Red Eagles. I don’t want to play against Cody without you.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Ian glances back at the guys on the ice. “Okay, I better go. See ya…” He zooms across the pond and steals the puck.

I smile to myself as I pretend I’m on the ice. Then I turn toward Duncan.

“Would you stop eating the snow. For all you know, a dog could have peed on it.”

Duncan puts his face closer to the snow. “Nope, no dog pee.” He eats another handful.

“I give up. Come on, let’s go home.” With one last look back at the pond, I lead the way along the path. The sounds of the skates scratching the ice and the shouts from the guys repeat in my head long after we’re out of earshot.